

DICKENS, FAGIN, AND MR. RIAH

The Intention of the Novelist

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AGITATION about the film version of *Oliver Twist* and its release in Berlin has given widespread currency to a belief that Charles Dickens himself was anti-Semitic, and that Fagin was conceived as "a savage racial caricature." Dickens describes Fagin, it has been pointed out, as "a very old, shrivelled Jew," "dressed in a greasy flannel gown," and with a "villainous and repulsive face . . . obscured by a quantity of matted red hair."

The ruffianly Sikes refers to him as an "infernal rich, plundering, thundering old Jew." And it might be added that Dickens portrays him as in the highest degree cowardly, treacherous, greedy, scheming, and vindictive.

But these facts cannot be understood in isolation. Does Dickens make Fagin more evil, we should ask, than the ferocious Sikes or the villainous Monks, neither of whom is a Jew? Are Fagin's hateful qualities presented as if Dickens thought them not simply human but peculiarly Jewish? Has he drawn other derogatory pictures of Jews in his writings, and no favorable ones? Do his utter-

ances elsewhere imply an ill opinion of Jews as a group?

BEFORE dealing directly with these matters, let us recall that in social thought Dickens was an advanced liberal, with a strong tendency toward the more humanitarian wing of the philosophical radicals, but with a fierce antagonism to the dogmas of utilitarian political economy. He hated the new Poor Law of 1834—a product of abstract economic theory—as an instrument of coldhearted cruelty to the poor; and he never wavered in demanding protective mine and factory legislation for the workers. In *Gradgrind* and *Bounderby*, of *Hard Times*, he created two annihilating symbols of the alliance between a harsh "hard-facts" social philosophy and the brutalities of business greed. In an age when many people still branded labor unions as criminal conspiracies and considered strikes of dubious legality, Dickens was among those who affirmed the right of working men to organize and strike.

Dickens had no formal affiliation with any religious body. His parents were Church of England, though not very devout. Dickens himself revered the moral teachings of Jesus, but was impatient of almost all theological dogmas, including the doctrine of the Trinity, and had sittings for a number of years in a Unitarian chapel. He favored disestablishment of the English Church, detested the narrow puritanism of the dissenting sects, and had no sympathy for Roman Catholicism, but was a firm believer in religious freedom and vigorously opposed all intolerance and persecution.

A strong emancipationist, he felt personally humiliated and stained at being obliged to accept the enforced services of Negro slaves when he was in Maryland and Vir-

As a by-product of the successful efforts of Jewish groups to prevent the showing of the film version of *Oliver Twist* in this country, and the more recent (and unsuccessful) effort to ban the novel from the New York public schools, there is a noticeable tendency in the public mind to classify Charles Dickens as an enemy of the Jews. The facts of the case hardly warrant this judgment, in the opinion of EDGAR JOHNSON, chairman of the English department at the City College of New York, who here outlines what is known as Dickens's relation to the "Jewish question." Mr. Johnson is the author of five books, and is at present working on a critical biography of Dickens which is scheduled for publication by Simon and Schuster some time in 1951.

ginia in 1842. He defended the Swiss Revolution of 1846 and the Continental uprisings of 1848, opposed the Second Empire, and wrote a plea for the Italian political exiles. He insisted that working men must unite to keep out of Parliament men who ignored their needs, and in the face of widespread fears reiterated his faith that the new voters admitted by the Reform Bill of 1867 would discharge their responsibilities for the common good.

It is not impossible, of course, that a man of these beliefs should also be anti-Semitic, but it would at least be incongruous. The entire pattern of Dickens's sympathies is one of deep and warmly felt concern for the unhappy and injured everywhere. His kindness of heart was so notorious that a writer of begging letters listed Dickens, Sir Robert Peel, and Queen Adelaide as the three likeliest touches for a five-pound note in all London. His writings are a vivid record of nearly all the humane causes in Victorian England. "God gave him," wrote the Earl of Shaftesbury, "a general retainer against all suffering and oppression." That only Jews should be excluded from his good will would be almost beyond belief. Nor in fact were they.

On rare occasions, it is true, he refers to Jews in his personal letters in terms that might be taken to imply a contemptuous attitude toward them. For example, I have noted two occasions when he uses the word "Jew" as a conventional synonym for unscrupulous rapacity. In the midst of one of his violent quarrels with his publisher, Richard Bentley, he writes to his friend Forster, "No news as yet from the 'infernal, rich, plundering, thundering old Jew.'" And to Thomas Hood, six years later, of a business agreement between the latter and his publisher, Henry Colburn, Dickens says, "There can be no doubt that he took a money-lending, bill-broking, Jew-clothes-bagging, Saturday-night pawnbroking advantage of your temporary situation." (Neither Bentley nor Colburn, incidentally, was a Jew.) Arranging some amateur dramatics with the Honorable Mrs. Richard Watson in 1850, he advises her to use the services of Nathan, the theatrical

costume-maker in the Haymarket, telling her that Nathan is a Jew, but "a very respectable man indeed." In one or two subsequent letters he jocosely calls Nathan the "Child of Israel."

None of these remarks, however, is in a context of hostile comment on the Jewish people, or occurs save as the briefest passing reference. In 19th-century England they did not have such a troubled background of violence and hatred as they would have in our time. Indeed, similar expressions may be found in nearly all the major writers of the period; Thackeray regularly gives auctioneers, money-lenders, and the keepers of sponging-houses Jewish names, and uses patronizing epithets like "a pink-eyed Jew boy." Unless they are very numerous, therefore, or are colored by other signs of prejudice, such turns of phrase in any of these writers hardly imply more than an uncritical use of conventional phraseology. Our sensibilities, scarred by recent world experiences, wince at this thoughtlessness, but we exaggerate if we read it as hostile. More than this, in Dickens's case the weight of his few careless references dwindles to insignificance in the enormous bulk of his correspondence. In the eight thousand or so of Dickens's letters that I have read, including about twenty-five hundred that have never appeared in print, I can recall not even a dozen in which Dickens uses any expressions of the kind.

THE charge that Dickens was anti-Semitic, in fact, has never been based on these details, but has rested almost entirely upon his portrayal of Fagin. But it should be noted that, aside from being called "the Jew," Fagin is given none of the characteristics ordinarily attributed to the Jew,* not even the usual earmarks of caricature. Fagin is clearly

* Nor are Cruikshank's illustrations of Fagin, despite popular assertions to the contrary, derived from the caricature Jew. Curiously enough, Fagin actually resembles nobody so much as Cruikshank himself; and the artist told Horace Mayhew that the famous plate of Fagin awaiting his death in Newgate was inspired by a glimpse he caught of himself in the mirror, biting his fingernails in anxiety over his difficulties in conceiving the picture.

delineated as not a Jew by religion: in the condemned cell he drives off with curses "venerable men of his own persuasion" who endeavor to give him religious consolation. He has no monstrous bulge of nose, no weird or frenzied gestures, no strange Hebraic idioms, not even the lisp or accent of the stage Jew. (A minor Jewish character in *Oliver Twist* talks with a lisp, and much later, in *Great Expectations*, a Jew with a lisp appears briefly, but Dickens does not employ the lisp to distinguish Jews as such; in *Hard Times* the amiable Mr. Sleary, of Sleary's Circus, who is not a Jew, also lisps.)

For all the frightful power with which Fagin is conceived, Dickens did not offer him as a realistic portrait. He knew the Jews of Houndsditch and had a copious acquaintance with the London stage, but Fagin is based neither on observation of living Jews nor on the clichés of the theater. Instead, "the merry old Jew" took form from an image in his creator's mind that Dickens regarded with an emotion of half-horrible enjoyment: an image of hilarious evil exultant in cunning self-applause. Daniel Quilp, the deformed dwarf of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, is a grotesque mutation of the type, in whom the malice forever boiling up out of a hellish high-spiritedness is distilled to an atrocious playfulness. Still another is the villainous Rigaud in *Little Dorrit*. Nobody has deduced from Quilp that Dickens believed in the malignance of all dwarfs and hunchbacks, although Delattre's *Dickens et la France* does argue absurdly (ignoring Charles Darnay and Dr. Manette) that Rigaud proves Dickens to have been prejudiced against the French.

No literary criticism of the 19th century with which I am acquainted suggests that the characterization of Fagin betrays anti-Semitism in its author. Nor has any such feeling apparently been widespread among Jews themselves. More than one Jew of my acquaintance, brought up in households not insensitive on the subject, has told me that Dickens's works, including *Oliver Twist*, were a favorite family reading, and that the thought of Dickens as an anti-Semite never

entered his mind. With a single exception, the 19th-century Jewish periodicals that I have been able to locate entirely ignore Fagin, although they voice many complaints against Gentile prejudice and against the delineation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

NOT until 1854—seventeen years after the first appearance of *Oliver Twist*—have I found any Jewish comment on Dickens. Then, however, the *Jewish Chronicle* in a leading article regrets the "despicable and hateful" part he assigned the Jew in his fiction, and asks "why Jews alone should be excluded from the sympathizing heart" of this great author and powerful friend of the oppressed. Later in the year, answering an invitation to an anniversary dinner of the Westminster Jewish Free School, Dickens declared: "I know of no reason that the Jews can have for regarding me as 'inimical' to them. On the contrary, I believe I do my part towards the assertion of their civil and religious liberty, and in my *Child's History of England* I have expressed a strong abhorrence of their persecution in old time."

Nine years later, in 1863, Dickens defended himself in greater detail. Mrs. Eliza Davis, a Jewish woman whose husband had bought Tavistock House from Dickens, had written him a letter telling him that Jews regarded his portrayal of Fagin as "a great wrong." He responded that if they did they were "a far less sensible, a far less just, and a far less good-tempered people than I have always supposed them to be." Fagin, he pointed out, was the only Jew in the story (he had forgotten the insignificant character of Barney), and "all the rest of the wicked *dramatis personae* are Christians." Fagin had been described as a Jew, he explained, primarily because a very large proportion of the receivers of stolen goods in the time to which the story referred were Jews. And finally, in calling Fagin a Jew no imputation had been suggested against the Jewish religion; the name had been used in the same way that one might call a Frenchman or Spaniard or Chinese by those names. "I

have no feeling towards the Jewish people but a friendly one," Dickens concluded his letter. "I always speak well of them, whether in public or in private, and bear my testimony (as I ought to do) to their perfect good faith in such transactions as I have ever had with them. . . ."

ALTHOUGH Dickens felt it absurd to regard Fagin as typifying his feeling about Jews, he was nevertheless troubled at being so seriously misinterpreted. In his next novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, he included a group of Jewish characters, of whom the most important is Mr. Riah, a gentle and upright old Jew caught in the toils of a Christian money-lender. Into the mouth of this very usurer, furthermore, Dickens places some of the ugliest Gentile libels against the Jews, letting his meanness serve as a sufficient commentary on their falsehood. Lizzie Hexam, one of the two heroines, takes refuge in affliction among a community of Jews, who treat her with the utmost generosity. To a clergyman worried about her remaining with them, she defends her Jewish employers: "The gentleman certainly is a Jew," she says, "and the lady, his wife, is a Jewess, and I was first brought to their notice by a Jew. But I think there cannot be kinder people in the world." Near the end of the book there is a passage showing that Dickens had reflected upon Mrs. Davis's reproach and understood how it came to be made, even though it imputed to him an injustice he had never intended. "For it is not, in Christian countries, with the Jews as with other peoples. Men say, 'This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks.' Not so with the Jews. Men find the bad among us easily enough—among what peoples are the bad not easily found?—but they take the worst of us as samples of the best; they take the lowest of us as presentations of the highest; and they say 'All Jews are alike.'"

To Mrs. Davis, certainly, the meaning of

this group of Jewish characters was clear. She wrote to Dickens during the course of the novel's serial publication in terms that can be inferred from his reply: "I have received your letter with great pleasure, and hope to be (as I have always been in my heart) the best of friends with the Jewish people." Some years later she gave him a copy of Benisch's Hebrew and English Bible, inscribed: "Presented to Charles Dickens, in grateful and admiring recognition of his having exercised the noblest quality men can possess—that of atoning for an injury as soon as conscious of having inflicted it." These words, Dickens told her, were more gratifying than he could possibly express, "for they assure me that there is nothing but good will left between you and me and a people for whom I have a real regard, and to whom I would not wilfully have given an offense or done an injustice for any worldly consideration."

Artistically, of course, Dickens's explanation on the subject of Fagin had been completely sound. *Oliver Twist* had expressed no sentiments against the Jews as a people, and there was nothing in the delineation of Fagin any more representative of them than Squeers was of men with only one eye or Uriah Heep of men with red hair. But not all people can read a work of art in the spirit of its meaning. Blind prejudice and the victims of its rancor alike twist the artist's voice to attack the weak and helpless; and it is clear that Dickens himself came to understand the danger of portraits such as Fagin. Surely the man whose developing awareness of the injustices of his time grew ever more acute and painful throughout the years, and whose flaming hatred of cruelty melted into an all-embracing sympathy with misfortune, was no intolerant anti-Semite and Jew-baiter. We have ample warrant to feel that, if he were alive today, no man would sound a more clarion note against discrimination than Charles Dickens or brave its evils with a nobler indignation.